SUSPENDED
somewhere between

a book of verse

Akbar Ahmed

Foreword by Daniel Futterman

Praise for *Suspended Somewhere Between*

"Anyone wanting to understand Islam today must read Akbar Ahmed's collection. We are given rare glimpses into the dilemmas, pain, and despair but ultimately love and hope of Muslims through the verses of this true renaissance man."

– Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*

"Pakistan's poets have chronicled its history. Now to join great lyricists such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, comes Ambassador Akbar Ahmed – anthropologist, diplomat, author, playwright, film maker, and poet. In his poetry he captures the complexity, the beauty, and the fragility of his beloved Pakistan – and of life. To go beyond the headlines, Americans should read this book."

– Ambassador Cynthia P. Schneider, Distinguished Professor, Georgetown University and Senior Non-Resident Fellow, Brookings Institution

"Ambassador Akbar Ahmed is a brilliant and wise authority on Islam, and now we have the chance to see what a beautiful soul he has. In these poems, we see the mix of the personal, political, historical, and lyrical. This book is deeply inspiring."

– Walter Isaacson, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, author, former chairman and CEO of *CNN*, and former editor of *TIME* magazine

"Akbar Ahmed's poetry speaks to the hearts and minds of all those who long for a sense of identity and belonging. *Suspended Somewhere Between* lets the reader find the common humanity that transcends borders and cultures and with that we can begin to build bridges. Thank you Akbar for engineering such a bridge."

– Andy Shallal, artist and proprietor of Busboys and Poets; founder of The Peace Café

For Zeenat—and Amineh, Arsallah, Babar, Fatima, Umar, Melody, Nafees, Mina, Ibrahim, and Anah—with love.

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FOREWORD

In 1215, the Persian mystic, Attar, saw the eight-year-old Jalal al-Din Rumi—later to be known only by his last name, and as the greatest of Sufi poets—walking through the streets of Nishapur behind his father. Rumi's father was an established teacher and mystic in his own right, but Attar was immediately struck by, and instantly recognized, the power of what followed him: his son. Watching the two walk towards him, Attar murmured, "Here comes a sea followed by an ocean."

I thought of that sentence repeatedly as I read (and re-read, with mounting joy) this book of poetry. Akbar Ahmed's best-known works—the writings for which he has garnered so much deserved respect and acclaim—are landmark investigations into the varied nature of Islamic faith. Besides his several wonderful plays, Ahmed has written most often in the voice of the scholar or diplomat—a scholar with an obvious and deeply felt personal connection to his subject matter, but one with the necessary journalistic reserve. Of the many things that make *Suspended Somewhere Between* such a treasured gift is the rare intense glimpse we are afforded into the soulful depths of this remarkable man. Ahmed's writings have, to date, been like a sea—rich and full of life and well worth exploring... Now, with this collection of poems covering a lifespan, we get the ocean.

The collection opens with what Ahmed tells us is "My first memory": his terrifying journey, as a four-year-old boy in 1947, "escaping" with his parents "from Delhi/on the slow train/in that hot summer/and heading for/Karachi." The subcontinent had been divided, Hindu and Muslim, and almost two million people would be killed in the fury of religious hatred that followed, each fleeing for the country, India or Pakistan, in which he would be part of the religious majority. Ahmed's Muslim family fled west. As he tells us in the poem, but for his mother's "intuition," his father would have been on the train before theirs, on which "everyone/was slaughtered/in the killing fields of the Punjab."

India's loss of the Ahmed family was Pakistan's, and our, gain. It placed Ahmed in that painful position—suspended somewhere between homelands, friendships, faiths—but it was a position that afforded the best, perhaps the only, vantage point from which to clearly see the beauty and madness of the world. And it proved to be the ideal place from which to begin his life's work: to try to bridge the gap between cultures, and to introduce one set of people to another. With each poem in this book, we are struck by visions and sounds and people we have not met before. We are showered with a series of bright flashes illuminating the world of Ahmed: the streets of South Asia, the diplomatic and academic halls of Great Britain and America, the tortures and joys of faith and love and familial duty—always from the point of view of a man suspended between—half inside, half out.

In the gorgeous *will ever be*, the young Ahmed worries that "an ancient Sanskrit curse" hangs over him in his adopted homeland. He struggles to find his authentic self and voice in this alien, often violent land where "our todays stand splashed/in infant confusion/in instant chaos." Somehow, miraculously, Ahmed knows that "Ali's hand holds my sword."

Ahmed has spoken of the strong influence on him of the poets from his culture: Rumi and Mirza Ghalib and Iqbal. He's also a man who was educated under the vestiges of the British Raj—first by Catholic priests at boarding school in Pakistan, and later at English universities. One can hear echoes of the Romantic poets —Keats and Wordsworth and Coleridge. For this reader, however, while savoring this collection I was struck for the first time in many years with the same feeling I had when I first encountered the poetry of Frank O'Hara, written in New York City in the fifties. I was a high school teenager, and poems like *The Day Lady Died* made me desperate to get out of my hometown, to attend college in New York, to explore the city, find my own artistic path and voice and friends. Reading Ahmed's *walking the streets with the Dahta*—about a night walk in Lahore—these many years later made me terrifically regretful I hadn't visited that city when I was briefly in Pakistan several years ago. Ahmed's poem captures the same sort of flashes and moments and visions of transcendent

beauty that illuminate O'Hara's great work. It awakened in me the same yearning to explore a new city, to lose myself in a new place, on new streets, among new people. What more can one ask of a poem, of any work of art?

One of my favorites of Rumi's love poems (from *The Essential Rumi)* is titled *Like This.* Among its stanzas:

> If anyone wants to know what "spirit" is,
> or what "God's fragrance" means,
> lean your head toward him or her.
> Keep your face there close.
>
> Like this.
>
> When someone quotes the old poetic image
> about clouds gradually uncovering the moon,
> slowly loosen knot by knot
> the strings of your robe.
>
> Like this.

To those gorgeous stanzas, I'd like to add this one:

> When he asks what the soul of a great man looks like,
> when he asks how deep is the ocean floor,
> show him this collection of poems,
> and say:
>
> Like this.

Dan Futterman
New York
January 2011

PREFACE

What is the need to gather a collection of poetry for publication? Is it something personal, perhaps the desire to share and explore a hidden part of myself? Is it the fear of mortality that prompts me to leave something behind? Is it a voice from somewhere inside saying it is time?

In my case, I am answering the call from inside. Like poetry everywhere, the poems in this collection express primal emotions that are universal. All of us have felt love, anger, pain, fear, joy, and hope. In that sense, I do not wish to add explanatory notes with every poem as to its context. Each should speak for itself. I have also not edited any of the poems, even if some word or thought written long ago now seems infelicitous. By editing one's own work at a different stage in life we impose unnecessary censorship on someone at a different time and place, and who, in some senses, is no longer the same person. It is best therefore to read what was written in its original form.

Most of my poems are literally the pouring forth of emotion and therefore raw—*I, Saracen* came rushing out in one whole piece after an intensely hot bath at the student's union at Birmingham University in England. Similarly, *they are taking them away* poured out complete in the early hours before dawn in Peshawar, months after the terrible events of the civil war in East Pakistan that it describes—events which resulted in the creation of a new nation, Bangladesh, and which I had locked away in my mind. I now confronted them face to face at the opposite end of the subcontinent.

Some poems are experimental. I have, for example, in *imperial parallels* pictured a turbulent love affair in which the lover uses history as an analogue to his predicament. Poems like *"Again"* explore the angst and physicality of young love. In *Spring thoughts in Farghana* I imagined the moment Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India and then barely twelve years old, buried his father.

The collection is a mosaic of my life which reflects different moods and experiences. The poems were written exclusively for

me as a response to intensely personal emotions that needed to be expressed. That is why some poems will convince orthodox Muslims that I am far too secular and others will agitate liberals who will see them as too Islamic. The glossary at the end of the collection explains words, concepts and places which may not be familiar to some readers.

The poems in this collection span half a century. One of the earliest, *L'Aigle*, was written when I was barely 20 in 1963, and *What is it that I seek?* when I am nearing 70 in 2010. Some poems reflect the confidence and optimism of youth. I look back on that young man and marvel at some of the early ideas that would blossom later in life. In *I, Saracen*, written when I had just turned 21, we note the yearning to trade the sword for the pen. Within a decade I would be sadder and more resigned, writing of the horrors of Muslim brother killing Muslim brother in *they are taking them away*.

As for explanations as to where I was and why a particular poem was written, I hope the division into five broad categories, although somewhat arbitrary, will throw light on the nature of the poem. The poems were written literally across the globe, but were most intensely felt in the heat of political and social developments taking place in South Asia, which so easily translated into violence. *The Passing of an Empire* was written in Washington, D.C., on the fifth anniversary in 2008 of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and reflects on the hubris and transience of world powers.

Even as a young man I sensed a crisis in Pakistan, which when I was growing up was the largest Muslim country in the world. I knew that if Pakistan faltered and failed it would reflect a larger problem in the Muslim world. So in some senses Pakistan became a metaphor for Muslims trying to sustain a modern state and society. That is why there are two sections that are devoted directly to Islam and Pakistan.

Some of the poems are as fresh today as they were when written so many years ago. *Pukhtun landscape: a mood* could be a comment on the collapse of law and order in contemporary northwest Pakistan. *At the Khaibar Pass* contemplates the futility of foreign powers conquering and holding the peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was written with imperial British troops in

Afghanistan in mind, but can be readily applied to American and NATO troops there today.

People often introduce me as anything but a poet. I have published poetry before, but I am delighted that Andy Shallal of Busboys and Poets has given me the opportunity to publish my poems in the USA. My warmest gratitude to Dan Futterman, Greg Mortenson, Cynthia Schneider, Walter Isaacson, and Andy Shallal, each one a star in every sense of the word, for their beautiful words of support. Dan contributed the brilliant foreword which I will always treasure. Darcy Levit and Jane Metcalf have been a joy to work with and unfailing in their commitment to the project. I am also deeply thankful to Craig O'Hara of the excellent PM Press for his guidance and support. I am grateful to Jonathan Hayden, Frankie Martin, deRaismes Combes, and Elise Alexander for helping reformat and retype the various poems for this collection. As always, I am grateful to my wife, Zeenat, for being my companion over the years when these poems were written and helping oversee this American edition.

I have traveled much, seen much, suffered much and much have I enjoyed the people I met and the places I visited. Now at this stage of my life I know that every day I have is a bonus, every friend a blessing and every member of my family a miracle. I dedicate this volume to my family who inspire me each and every day—in gratitude for their love and as an expression of mine.

By publishing these poems, I join the ranks of those who can sit back from the hurly burly of life and contemplate the human predicament in verse. The title of the collection, from the poem *prospects*, reflects our situation today as we increasingly appear suspended somewhere between cultures, places, peoples, and periods in time. And perhaps there is no better antidote to this predicament than the hope contained in that great line by John Lennon—"All you need is love."

Akbar Ahmed
Washington, D.C.
January 2011

PAKISTAN

Train to Pakistan

My first memory
shaped me,
continues to
inform me
and I share it
with an entire
subcontinent

A small boy
in a crowded train compartment
bathed in dim yellow light
motionless at night
stranded
in the killing fields of the Punjab

My parents were escaping
with me
from Delhi
on the slow train
in that hot summer
and heading for
Karachi
to a new country
and a new destiny

My mother had
insisted
my father not take
the previous train;
her woman's intuition
was right—
everyone on that train
was slaughtered

except, of course, the engine driver
both sides were careful
to let him live
and I was not too young
to feel
the searing heat
of the irrational hatred and anger
around me
and what it said
of the desperate need to love and be loved

And I am always
that boy—
slightly bewildered
and lost
but always wide-eyed
with curiosity
at the colors and peoples
of the world passing around me
and always hopeful
because I know
some higher power
looks over me.

diaspora

of the noon-pierced dust
settling in
to choke the vision with
mirages of things to be.
All fragmented
omnivorous
dreams hunger
starve and settle about me
like the daughter of mneme.
Bulbous domes in mist
shrouded confuse me as I
hear refuge in the gliding
itinerancy of the muezzins
echolalia. Through the
noon-heat edacity
of the seraglio lifts
the veil and I see the
squalor of pavement-domesticity;
the diaspora sticks in
a gullet of despair into
the heart of my alien stomach.

A sloe bat draws its fangs
and a thoughtful spider
spins its palmipede web
across the eastern horizon:

Lal Killa and
Hyderabad, Deccan
crumble into
those mosaic
tiles of my floral
incubus. The
awakening in the

actuality of parched Sindh.
Karachi: the harlot
of ethnic hungers
sucks me in. The
strange lacerated hospitality of
a new skin excruciatingly growing
excruciatingly pealing

haunting lacuna
the worn pain of a
suspended past.

will ever be

Let me rub the sleep
that dusts superfluity
from my eyes
under my thumb-nails dies the sparrow
yearning for a brave new Pakistan
at last
with the final squeaks of the parrot

perhaps that day will never be

I have not chest and shoulder
enough
to include all the birthing problems
of this bleeding psyche
but have heart now
to create in this Pakistan
a galvanism to stir
contagious glory from the tattered cob-webs
hung in shreds
in the lonely nooks of our minds
from the paradigmatic personality of the faded
heroes of yesterday

perhaps that day will never be

for our yesteryears Delacroix paints
our todays stand splashed
in infant confusion
in instant chaos
and harbour no promise
of genius
or even sanity.
There must seems be
an ancient Sanskrit curse

over me
but
yet awhile
that great heart of Umar
beats in me
and Ali's hand holds my sword

perhaps that day will never be

find in my land
openness and brotherhood
and in that lost Islam
a beechen plot to lie in
of mottled pages
while moths wing out.
Standing bow-legged
in the dim corridors of
myopic history
I suck at the lollipops of the past
for reprieve
find tolerance and tenets
of emerald Islam
crying
its now or never

perhaps that day will never be

but perhaps it may
then I change it sure.

'knew not her'

the child died.
Leaving nothing
only dilated eyes
that still burn
cauterized in me.
Her mother knew not her
transience births indifference
whose tears were now
medicinal gum
dripping their offal
in menstrual regularity;
her father
made sibilant noises
but was dry;
oedipus died in the womb.
But I knew her
only
through the luminous transom
of those eyes.
The child died
but she lived for me
those tiger eye-slits
parted in lush gentians
of another world;
always green.

the Headmaster

when he bulges his eye
as the orbed sun

just over the morning hill
he frightens me
and I contract
to the detumescence
of my fresher days

the Headmasters grip
lies unbroken
though carrying the cancer of time
on his crooked back
like my forgotten friend
Quasimodo
and when he smiles
I relief in toykind joy
though in distance
he appears shrunk
and I magnified
in importance

quietly posing
to hear the countless feet
of regiments of whores on the march.

walking the streets with the Dahta

Lahore's phosphorescent guts are blurred
at night in November
but in this night
Jomay raat
the Dahta walked in green neon
and around his marble epitaph
a thousand beggars begged
in a unity
insured by a complete
selfishness
only Hujwiri walked among them
in wide-fingered benevolence;

sight was half-played
on the retina as of
a half-blind man.

Incessant petal-drops
spectruming
an opulent rain that
drapes in
Shalimar
translucent muslins
wafting
around a lung-seducing
musk-incense:
the heat-scent of the devout
as he gapes
in cup-palmed awe and a little
love.

Some beggars swayed
gnarled dying tree-trunks meanly clothed in

winter leaves through which dim-glowed
the night-lights of bazaar nocturnality;
some beggars dressed in tiers
of foreign suiting and fat of Lahori
ghee
rolled one eye to Arabic calligraphy
one to Swiss watch;
some eyes shone in kahjal darker than
the effacing black burkha
but the lights danced in their
brief pupils.

One crawled on fours—up my hairy calf
in grotesque impossible
contortions of the human mind
that still blinked the misplaced
sanguine smile—so beautifully irrelevant.
The flies had gone for the season
the dogs perennially unimpressed
and didn't care anyway
soft-nosed they prodded
warm smoky dung;
they had seen it all before:
the dazzling lights
then
then the dazzling dark
all the professional beggars re-acting
their roles
with first year RADA earnestness
the much-moneyed, heavy-vehicled beggars
sure of their goodness
in this visit to the Dahta
who walked among them all
palm-humoured and light
equating all, elevating all.
He wasn't frown-minding
that some were deadly serious

it was all in the game
of love.
Not for him—he knew

for when he walked in
his many-varied neons he
also mixed in the minds
of his pilgrims
and amongst them
there were also some
like the whore of the red tit
of the next door mandi
hanging from low garish-painted doorways
crepuscular lives
so like his own locale
but he was contented this evening

A happy child urinated with abandon;
a lal-bearded villager
almost in orgasm
of his onanistic
religious frenzy;
a group-man grown holy
was serious
as serious as Alamgir at Friday asr
in a Ramzan in the Deccan.

"Na koi banda raha na koi banda nawaz."
Iqbal should have known better
as the cane-waving policeman
smiles at me
and takes care to reply in his English
but the Dahta is unequivocal in his care
and perhaps the false beggar
returns from him richer.

Fires that explode
like festive crackers
at the pit of my stomach
up through me
to a Christmas ringing
in my ears

I sense but do not smell
onion and sweat
on the tongues of the masses
pressing each other through the bazaar's
intestines
that creak with indigestion

The Badshahi now rose
dated splendour
in black lumpy papier-mache.

Blind tangah horses chilled and
blackly farting into the mists;
idle men with fierce moustaches
idling with one hand
into the idleness of their shalwars
and static between rising
pyramids
of salt-white batashas
sit active pharaohs
in ready expectation of
another Moses—who never comes.

They were all there:
love remains love
however crudely exhibited
faith turns to love
however clumsily expressed
love creates faith
from whatever quarter coming.

I came back that evening
levitated on the horns that tossed me
acute-feeling the goodness and
friendship
of the Dahta
flowing in the streets of his Nagri
and in me
where it mattered.

Major Sabir Kamal: the last stand

Kingdoms fell
cosmos and comets crashed
and the sun turned over in its thrice-told tale
of terror
and this son of Sialkot stood
thigh-high
in gore and gut
held off the shining hordes
held them
this magnificent shield while others may retreat
while
something of the ancient myth be yet retrieved
stood there
grim as death

stood there
where the river waters are dark, the earth green
above him a spurning sun
around him spinning blood
there isn't loneliness enough to crush him
yet
the soggy letter from his just-wed wife
soaked in tears now soaks in red
hark
who stands silhouette in the sunset stock-still
bloody bayonetted but refuses to bow
now
the earth revolves a reluctant revolution

a piffer is down
and he's gone.

I remember,
Dacca, March, 1971

Sabir, friend and brother
your gray eyes suddenly become somber
foreseeing
a universal blood dance
a universal blight that
amputees inflict on themselves
you saw it all
the lost cause, the awesome response
yet you smiled
the secret smile of the soldier
knowing
that darkness will descend
and eternal glory be won.

Pukhtun landscape: a mood

whom the gods on high wish to destroy
they will soften, they will madden by and by

I don't hear singing in the fields any more
I don't hear the reed by the riverside
the sounds of laughter seem to have gone evermore
even the tears have almost dried

the fever stalks this land
from peak to glen and clan to clan
slinks under the feet, floods the sky with a free hand
it withers youth, dries the blood in the veins of man

no door can lock it out
no heart can have any doubt

the cock doesn't crow anymore
and the moonlight fails as balm
the Afridi mountains lean in awe
the waters at Nowshera are far from calm

in Swat they are storing for winter the apple yields
the Hashtnagar harvests have been good this year
but there is little joy in the tall green-gold cornfields
where men sit waiting with weapons in fear

the foreign *feringhee* is not the foe
the enemy is within, do you know

falls the stifling scent of despair: hark
foot-falls of a strange doom sweeping wide
ghastly forms taking shape in the dark
hyaena howls, ape snorts, the vulture is here by our side

faces at the *hujra* are grave
the shadows grow dark and sure
talk no longer of the wise and brave
men sit at councils of war

we do nothing better than wait
and waiting drags at such a slow rate

the *tarboor* ambiguity is so apt today
enemy is cousin and cousin is enemy
play it heads or tails whichever way
the enemy is known wherever he may be

nothing grows from the barrel of a gun
save fever and fire and fear
what for one man is games and fun
for another is injustice without peer

the old order is sick in bed
and our tomorrows hint at being red

Pukhtunwali has become a myth and rare
and the Pukhtun doesn't live here anymore:
the Mohmand here, the Khattak there,
khan behind this wall, *kissan* behind that door

brother greets brother at dawning
through the sights of a gun
people will happily give you warning
tranquility vanishes with the sun

sure Samson's strength buried his enemy dead
but the temple came crashing over his head.

At the Khaibar Pass

There is nothing spectacular
or even dramatic
in the climb
or the mountains

but
the air is almost tense in its
silence
so insolently indifferent
to me
and my times
here: all is awe and hush

far beyond the Pass: Kabuls and Samarkands,
all that the urban imagination conjures in nostalgia,
the mainsprings of conquest,
that flooded
the fat lands this side of the Pass: Delhi and Agra
the irresistible lakes of journey's end

the ear
strains to hear,
and almost does,
the distant din of battle
the clang and clamour of men at war
steel ringing on steel
cries of death
and victory
of hooves galloping hard from Ghor
for the secret treasures of the Ganges
kingdoms rising as swiftly as the stroke of a scimitar
and vanishing as swiftly
these putty-coloured mountains

seem to suggest with supreme indolence,
you
who would stride and strut and swear
look on us and wonder.

They say
there was an Empire once. And that recently.
On which the sun never set.
Today its legacy is a toy rain,
some cement blocks in tidy heaps
(to stop German tanks, if you please)
and
some insignia and escutcheons scratched
like military badges
on the shoulders of wayside rocks:
fading and exotic memories of Gurkha and Sikh,
plump, open-mouthed, lizards
sitting so still
they could be part of the regimental emblem.

Like wind they came, like water they left,
the thousands of soldiers, the thousands of years,
passages long gone, long forgotten
in this catacomb of desire and history.

Afridi and Shinwari
and before them
old Tahtarra
watch from eagle eyes
oh conqueror gaze on these and wonder
oh traveler be warned and step softly
the hills seem to know and the air whispers
this evanescent journey
this mad rush
will continue
will remain as desperate and as passionate
as of yore

but to this end we must come:
silence beyond and silence behind;
to this end
teasing imagination leads us;
and leaves us.

Ethnicity

they ask:
who am I?
what is my race?

my father from India (UP)
(originally Arabia)
my mother, too, from India (CP)
(originally Kabul—the Barakzai tribe)
mythical combination
of royal and saintly
families—

what does that make me?

I feel
in this world
not of it

I possess no
shajras—
if they existed
they were lost in the
blood and thunder
of Partition

I have no long lines
of genealogical charts
or kinship maps
elders
who may remember
are dead
or displaced—
the remaining are
dislocated

and placed in a
new tribal category:
refugees or muhajirs
(with an outsider ring)

I stand alone
(no Father's Brother's Sons
and cousin configurations)
in a society
as aware
of roots as an
anthropologist
doing first field-work

then—
where do I stand?
or
where do I go?
the questions are as old
as the answers

the small boy by the road

a small boy by the Swat road
in gray shredded clothes
embryo years nailed to his
tired body
his luminous eyes
weary
as the mountains hovering over us
who cares
or who knows
this prey of perhaps
piles and pyorrhea
diarrhea
or just the common cold

a day will have to come
when that cave will fall in.

I saw a girl in Swat
by the road holding flowers to sell
she looked so much like my little sister
I moved moody in memory

and that God above
holding His sides in
secret mirth
the awful mouth open
creating in sperm
moulding in beauty
then laughing
at physical decay
for an unknown barbaric joke
the story of all mens years
a sorry decline in pattern

enough of princes and presidents
let us hear
of
humans and human beings
of the small boy with black eye sockets
as big as his black beret
already worn
all ready for sleep,
but
who knows
or cares.
For me
the blue air clouded
into darkness.

they are taking them away

sullen shine the stars
the moon in agony aloof
so still stand the palm trees
the seasons are bearing
my dreams away

sanity
suspended
while all the black
horrors of the mind
uncoil
slowly
snakely
settle
over this land

they came by night
they came in shame
they came
to take the weapon and the woman

my throat
was dry
and chilled
my groin, for

they are taking them away
to the slaughter houses

have you ever seen
a child's head crushed like a coconut
or a proud man cry like a baby

women, like broken toys,
on the rail tracks to Santahar Junction
bright flags fluttering from their thighs
does it now matter
which side did this
or why

they were playing these games
with death
over there in the green lands of Bengal
in the year of the lord 1971

oh the storm that raged
under the blue Bengal sky
within man,
and without him,
when rape was relief
death a desire
and killing a kindness.
Mama, hide me in your arms, for

they are taking them away
to the slaughter houses

incest in the air
foul vapors in every mouth
will nobody care
to break this awful spell

the Major swore he saw
rows of what looked like
round loaves of brown bread
in the Government College dining hall:
these were sliced off my sisters;
(while they writhed alive in the dormitories above).

I'm curled, cursed
and cold
alone
in the night's chill womb, for

they are taking them away
to the slaughter houses

can all the waters of the Bay
all the tears of the Orient
wash the red stains and ugly scars
of hate
inflicted
in that single moment of suicide
compelled by an irresistible lust
for self-destruction

when a house is empty
the family missing
and silence a way of life
the nights get chilly
the nights get lonely
and in the night
strong men break down to cry, for

they are taking them away
to the slaughter houses

when Bihari fate was sealed
and Bengali destiny designed
when the scythe was an argument
and the bullet an answer

the lords of men
gods of pain
have taken council:
the unholy juggernaut will move

it is decreed
and none to challenge it
what compulsions drive such men
what fear makes them such savages
while reason, so thin on the breast,
deserts so quickly

who was martyr
which one saint
depended only
on the language he spoke;
to such a fine point
is the concept of alienation reduced; for

there is no shame like the shame of
taking them away to the slaughter houses.

LOVE

Ithaca revisited

he
broke their statues
drove them from their temples
but the gods lived
still
he wore his delicate dignity like a crown
of thistle-down thorn
shadowed in the ruins
to see
an antique wonder
buried in the cypress rubble
of your sailing debris
must care triumph
for now
all our golden columns
seem broken-toothed
you stand marble-taller than
that ancient deity
and I still wish to put
morning flowers at your feet

I just might

As I thrilled
the castanets
of my yeasty
self
I cried for
silence:
don't ask for the stars
I just might
pluck them
or the moon
or I just might
pull it in by her
trailingwhiskered
moon-beams.

Our brains cracked
on her flagstones
and spilt in
four-cornered directions
like spilt honey
I came whole
but
rapidly
don't ask for attention
in the unheeded
cries of the Karachi crow
or I just might
explain him to you.

She sat on me
this
nightly succubus
glowering the evil-sign
blue-black nippled

as two-month boil
but vanished one sun-rise
because
I asked for it
and she just
complied.

Fly, my little blue-eyed angel

in the flashing light
of the hurricane-lamp
the stretching spider on my fading retina
darkly splattered
spins its sticky spider-line around us.
Your blue eyes scream
of
another world
another spider that webs you
of
the thread that begins to suffocate us
slowly now,
inexorably.
Escape.
My little blue-eyed angel.
Escape
these psoriatic devils
and their spinnerets.
Or they will cannibalize you here.
You
so damned fragile-blue.
Fly.
Fly to the world of love.
In love there lies strength.
In love
salvation.
And I will follow
if
allowed
to
survive.

Golgotha

That bolus that stuck
ringed in my breath-pipe
that misery that muck
scattered me like tripe

on a nude day
spent lying in the solarium
and nothing to pay
except the die-hard solatium

that the invertebrate needs
and love too soon hopes
spent wasting in distant meads
twisted in tiring ropes

again and again
the trumpet sounds
to herald the bane
of white skulls in mounds,

a caveat, a caveat
a union, a fusion
too soon, to part
all in a hopeless illusion.

But they will again
come cantering in
in vain, in vain
nor heed my mind's din

meanwhile, in my breath-pipe
I find irretrievably stuck
scattering me like tripe
love, that muck.

"Again"

Each time
I bend over you
I see the sand-grains
from the past leeched
to your lips;
then I die a little
and conjure
oblivion.
Those kisses that
footprint little webs
across my forehead
are cold now
as yesterday's grave
and the morning hope.
But sometimes
I strike
a
passion-vein
then I
salamander
in the murky flames of your arm-pits
and thighs.

Crucifixion II

That grating noise
of blade on bone
when they sawed me at the hip;
the meat-grinder
no stranger to my fears
now spliced
while I mouth
a song
of a kind—but
I learned to walk
straight
from the hunch-back;
a fly astride another
pleasure or procreation?
no matter
the whole business must go on
in the delicious diesel
smells of an
October evening.

Requiem for a priest

I lay
upon a broken spine
a victim of her clichés
that laughed
at first
then
tied me in
tight.

All is calm
on the shingles of our ruin
save my mind
frothing
like a mad Multani dog
the scorpions by night
and strangers by light
broken-backed by fight.

I lie
motionless
not for any dawn
nor reprieve
nor requiem
but on the hope
of that single
word

spine-cracked

I wait.

the scimitar-wallahs

in mid-desert
at mid-sun
when it comes
it must come
as the flashing of the scimitar
silver
at noon
to sever us
suddenly
no more
decapitated
and who cares
whether my
pores and limbs and fibres
still cry for you
or knows

baking

spilt over the hot sand-grains
of my inner deserts

and I alone.

Since

I have not slept blackness
and slipped
the nightly
nocturnal sublimation

I dangle,
comes the
suffocating successions of dark,
a silver coin on a silver string
revolving in sentience
over and over
the same, set orbit.

Last night I dreamt:
I, a female-ant
smug
on an endless beach
of brown sugar;

I knew the joy of the
columned sea
the strength of
sparkling solitude.

Then came the great
soughing
of great wings:
giant vultures
outstretched on the falling horizon.

Carnivorous claws reeked in grasp.
As they flapped in
I saw their faces
with rat-like horror:

they were those of my friends
and brothers.

I knew then
forever
I had slipped
blackness.

'the world is too much...'

there is so much
to do
and here in the East
so many
lifetimes to do it in
yet can be as futile as
the plod of camel clip-clop
on Elphinstone's spine
in Karachi

often times, however
when she laughs
at all I hold
sane and meaningful
I become confused
as on an invidious isle
in a delta of
time present and time future
that must always be a function
of time past
and fret

are my values and gods to be
false

more than anything
I fear flab anywhere.

yesterday

yesterday she was Spanish
all Andalucia
bristled in from her
and I

I, too
as Spanish
as a Spanish bull
dying of
picadors
in the Madrid sun

and all her
yesterdays
howling for the
sainted mercy
that cried bleeding on
every cross in every home
in Catholicdom

the original sin

Irresistible as a
steam engine pulling out of
a small station of
moving sands

hot, compressed
sands that
a thin long finger
across the Sind sky
limped
a perennial tattoo
on the chest
of the coolie

but in his charred-gold heart
there was a stiffening misery
as the weight
of poverty
crushed his head;

I too, moved
on those sands
hot, compressed
unknowing
and I too knew
the weight
of almond-eye misery
crushing my head
while she did not dare
to look over her shoulder.
Her love was an octopus-mouth
given gladly
out of habit-need
bedding and trunk now

shadowed overhead
but my compensation
was not even an iota
in identity of sacrifice;
she called me by
my coolie number that
attached around my neck
and forget I
was coolie—me
not number one-three.

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

if there was an iron-tongued
flame
that is spent today
if there were damascened sunsets
ablaze
they are moth-faded now
if there was colour on my cheek
aglow
and love in my heart
afire
that is in the past—now
the phthisic routine;
again and anon;

to exist
as torpid as the days inane patterns
on a skeletal schedule
without you

and there will always be
darkness at noon.

hands of the stranger

still the trickling humdrum life
and see the humbug
around

what's worse

learning to tolerate it;
this idiopathy has no cure
still the hypodermic fails
just under the skin

you
in the shape of a
schizo-griffin
appear cannibalistic
and devour me—
piecemeal;

the eye hangs out
of the skulls socket
and
the optic nerve
refused to laugh.

her iced uro-spittle
baby-dribbles
on the
slaked tongue
nailed
to the silent sanded beach;

I can hear the hum
of flies that sting cattle—
yes yes yes
yes
I may be going mad
but
in your cooled skeleton arms
the sea is near me and above me
and what's more important
the humdrum ceases
and the humbug recedes.

The King strikes

She bore me on gelded dreams
those youth-and-oft
dreamt pearly gates
haunched in defecation over
wheezing clouds
the witch-doctor said he
couldn't remove the woman
bone-stuck in my throat and his evil colours
do you love her
or that maddening rush
through the canals of lust

in that solemn panegyris
I've noted
even with all the luck and experience
you always start at square one;

oftentimes
his youth suddenly
died on his lips
and he became
as significant as
an empty pail.

galactic veil

prometheus chained
by the four-cornered walls
of my fragile
snowed head
and bounden
and the first spinning
drifts of love
that they took away
by calling those immortal embers
only water and jelly
and there her body the
curve of a decaying tissue
that must swirl the dance of decay
and the lizards lambent tongue
lashed
as a feather that became a plume
when the mouth screamed its rage
heave the globe of darkness
for here
there is no sadness in this
wonder
only the stellar insignificance
of brief moments in the lighted
flash of a womb that quietly
obeys its congruent
trajectory of flights to other earths.

a little while

a little boy
playing
with words
a little voice
crying
for love
a little love
wasting
for you

the senseless patterns
of the garden butterfly
the insistent urgency
of the army motorcycle
all those hours
dropped in waiting
all those years
in hoping
a marshmallow love
that is never toasted

To my mother

When I walk at night alone
in the deep wadis of her sobs
or when I know that each time I drive fast
or laze the reply to her letters;
when I know that at midnight
she sits up praying to her God
to keep me warm and whole,
when I know that she will still bless me
though I give her eyes cause to tears,
when I know that all my warts and ways
will turn to gold at her simple touch,
then I see through her the God she sits rotating her
beads to and then I know that her God
will always be there for me to reach out and touch.

'this thing called love'

I did penance
in the dungeon
dankness
of her womb
though they cried
retribution
and I wept
Christ-like in
mislaid isolation;
there is an agony in this place
that will not cease
the rats nibbled
at my fingers of courage
and I
choking
on wet straw
saw no salvation
only continued
retribution.

pain

the sword-blade
curved over the head
the breath of pain
close behind the neck
heat in the hot haze
of July
sitting uncomfortably
like a big boil between the buttocks
that will not leave

here, here
the earth spinning its green orbits
now, now
that word, again
Now
tears streaming down brown
beds of dried gravel
and the here and now
tingling along the fine edges
of his teeth as blued ice
nerve-exposed and goose-pimply

pain amber that obliterates youth
kills joy in the eyes
attenuating
pain spluttering sparkling singing
and slowly
killing

making things so distant
making noises so irrelevant

For Umar, with love

strings of spittle hang
at your mouth, you,
drooling, helpless
clutching wildly at air
your tiny body—just six months old—
cannot move at or obey your will
only your eyes
lucidly convey and pierce me with love
filling my being with a strange
affection and wish to protect
as I am sure my father was moved
in my infancy

a cycle of a generation
(some thirty years)
separates us in the present
and separates me from your state
in the future
when you will be amused,
humour, tolerate me
and I
drooling, helpless, infant-like
look on you with love in my eyes

the cycle complete
it will be time for me
to leave you
with your new-born

Zeenat, Princess of my Heart

In robust days and ill health
In failure and in wealth
Through the highs and lows
You always took for me the blows

Through the long changing decades
In cities, mountains and glades
You have been my most valuable part
Zeenat, beloved Princess of my heart

The Rack

I no longer care
what's worse
all care for my care has gone

only a vicarious itch
as pleasant as
genital scratching on a July day,
now lingers.

Once there was
an airport urgency
that too is evaporated
like sweat-beads on a July day,
strung on her upper lip.
Yawing
on a sea of senseless semantics
no sail or soul or sign;
hung in mid-air
like the evening azaan on a July day.

And I no longer seem to care.

The Sailing

After many a day
we entered
the cinnamon-scented
harbour lights of your eyes
to rest a breath
in concordance with the lilac eve
of your spirit
and mine;
tides will move
like rhythmic bowels
and I will sail.
But
have I the command
to order the anchor
anymore
anymore after you?
And you?
Will you stand
dry-eyed
knee-deep
in the debris of our
concordance
on the isolated shore
slowly waving a
diminishing heart
that lingers a powdered hope
in your innermost veins
or
will you
be thinking of the next passenger-boat?

ISLAM

I, Saracen

On the western front frowned the eagle
mighty Caesar in imperial regalia regal,
in the east prowled minions of Xerxes
fierce lions swift as desert breeze.

Out of the shimmering sands I rode
suddenly Colossus-like the world I strode
giving from my raiment fair
an Alhambra here, a Taj there

In me flowed an eastern weather
I swerved and moved like a bird in feather,
I was Khaldun, Khayyam and Ghalib
not mere seraph but from Adam's own rib

Cordoba and Cathay are all mine
mine are sahara, tundra and pine
mine, Kubla's dome of pleasure
mine, Rumi's secret sufic treasure

The Bedouin, the Brahmin, the Confucian, they heard
the powerful rhythm, the azaan that averred
the tauhid of Allah, the glory of Islam,
pale quaked the Cross, the Shinto, and even Ram

Ghazni at Somnath and Samarkand flowered
Avicenna and Averroes all ignorance murdered
Haroon's Nights illuminated darkened lives
women-kind awakened as empresses, poets and wives.

Badr was sobbing, Panipat weeping
the universe gaped as I lay sleeping,
kaleidoscopic chaos seemed far to me
I slumped, I sank, I fell free

free of strife, inebriated with bliss
complacency seduced me with slumberous kiss
victim to the venomous charms of sloth
on my internal fountains died all froth
as placid, blue azure I slept;
yet ever the Islamic cosmos wept.

Then O God, a nightmare vision I saw
a leprosy white Crusader garbed for war
see, his red teeth and purple eyes
O, see, within me pale hope dies

Now who will find me Khaibar or Alamgir?
succour me friendly sultan or saintly pir
the Crusader slowly moves his cloudy hand
with it he brandishes an atomic wand

On his heaving shoulder sits a hungry eagle
it starts, it flutters its wings regal
the Crusader melts, sheds his amorphous wear
yet appears again as a Russian bear!

In my dream voices loud and clear
echo with hoary throats and sere
of Communism and Capitalism, Capitalism and Communism
lesser voices chant: Negroism, Hinduism, Arabism

Thundering 'isms crash about me
I gasp, I wake, I see
around me fragments of Suez fall
Muhammad Mustapha I hear you call

Prophet in the desert, before Allah falling
I hear you in the muezzin's calling
I vow again to revive within me your song
to sing it forever, sweet and long.

The task so immense, its breadth its length
so great, I sip of history for strength
then scimitars cast aside, quills unsheathed
Muslim true never surrendered while he breathed

Out, out damned spots of blind imitations
sham, servile servings of other nations
exit, eclectic intellect of alien droppings,
time-patience to grow own mental wings

Out, out ICS blackened, pseudo-Englishmen
their traits, their chota-pegs, their Victorian pen
I, iconoclast, rejuvenated, I smasher of the obsequious
saliva-fallen; I reject the kala-sahib infamous

Then computers and the minaret,
the maulvi and the flats-to-let,
the Boeing coaxed in air, with soft bismillah
external strength, throbbing internal Allah

Beware Marx and his spiritually sick sentences
beware Freud, his phallic male's repentances
but open to me Marxist economics, Freudian theories
international answers to personal queries

Then, one day my head high again, I will rise
pure Muslim, Marxist-Malinowski-Mawdoodi wise,
one day I will no longer sweat-fear to dream,
then, then I will possess the key to 'alif lam mim'.

the eternal moth

Encroaching in the diaphanous
vault over the hollow
sands
where Burton
dreamt visions
and the Muminun
feels your steps
ineradicable on the mind of man;
as heat-bars on winter nights
as sanity in Ramzan lights
as the stuff of Sufi sights
        longing in sterility
        with opiates of
        a glow that beat
        once
        now dwindles
in the rush of the
emotional cul-de-sac of
material orders
saved—
just
        as the clairvoyant
        twin eyes, lidless,
        Mecca-Medina
        keep eternal vigils
        pierce
the pinched, warped
invincible alien ethos
treacle-like
relentless ruthless
seeping in to
corrupt
terra Islamica.

An I

Just by me
sat
a slab of marble
and a thin blue chest
in my flame.
In front,
an eagle.
Splattered
feather and gore
on the cypress wall.
In the Quran
the sword of Umar
curved in agony.
Above:
an invisible electric fan
streaked breeze
inconsequentially
and senselessly.
And I was
in the marble stone
that soon took
the birds broken bone
and the Arabic book
a celestial look.

the meeting

as I sat
at maghrib prayer
at dusk in June
in the small village mosque—
darkening shadows draped around
like dark sheets
and the heat of the brick floor
still rising like waves to my face—
I saw
in the corner of my eye
a flash of colour
yellow, green and silver
a snake—the deadly village viper
it stood stock-still by the prayer mat
still as the world around me
and—as unreal
and in that eternity
we were suspended in
a perfect harmony of calm and poise:
man and animal;
we were one in the house of God—
it waited for me
to turn my head in salaam
and when I looked—
it had gone.

The Path

Like my Sunni ancestors
Inspired by the blood and traditions of the Prophet
I am on a journey
With others walking alongside
Some taking the help of imams and ayatollahs
Others the law of Moses or the love of Jesus
Yonder
I see those who find the divine in the Ganges
Or on top of the Himalayas
They find the divine in the noble doings of Lord Ram
Yet others find other paths
I wish them all Godspeed
For all of them are part of the "nations and tribes"
That the Quran tells me I must love
So that I can love my God

la mosquée a Paris

I sit cross-legged and quiet
hunched under the dome's weight
and crenellated curves in riot
in almost-touches of mystic state

Allah calligraphed in around
and Muhammad alongside
chanting the Muminun's sound
sensibility's osmosis opened wide

Up rises a Berber figure
clothed in jubbah and mystery
he looms near and bigger
and peers at my history

The mosque is his
the Islam mine
the cry is his
the meaning mine

He little understood
I little explain
all mutter he should
all mutter I feign

The language is thine
the faith mine
the Command is Thine
the meaning mine

Shadows heap on me
like darkened dandruffed leaves
and I hardly see
as blinding light grieves

Shadows lengthen away
outside, the nooned-eye astare
at the strange play
of a soul abare

An Andalucian fountain
gurgles courtyard joy
of a snowy mountain
of a forgotten ploy

Filigreed fronds sway
mucilaginous dates fill
stomachs on Heavenway
of purple maghrib's chill

Far from here is Paris
far the nipples of Montmartre
far the 'n'ai rien compris'
of the etiolated heart

I sit cross-legged awhile
in the ambience of Islam
drained of all bile
deceived in phthisic calm

The Berber bows
a Fulani moans
the trellis soughs
the Fulani groans

Cross-legged I sit
in the bubble of a votive tear
with inarticulate wit
feel my tenebrific fear

"Oh Islam
sleep silent, sleep strong
gather afresh, gather anew,
then blaze again flames long
inspiring light much over-due".

ECHOES OF HISTORY

The Passing of an Empire

When I was a child
I saw the British empire dying;
it just deflated
like a gigantic balloon.

I saw another empire rapidly growing;
but was George Bernard Shaw right?
I always wondered as a schoolboy.
Surely there was an American civilization,
not just the swift passage
from barbarism to decadence.

Great empires and civilizations
are judged by
the monuments they leave behind.

The Egyptians have left us
the pyramids;
the Greeks,
the Acropolis;
the Mughals,
the Taj Mahal.

When future generations
ponder American civilization
how will they view
the golden arches of McDonald's
the Colonel's buckets of chicken
and Hooters?

And how will the conquered
recall their masters?
In Asia they remember

the pyramids of skulls
left by the Mongols;
in Europe,
the gas chambers
of the Nazis.
Will Iraqis and Afghans
remember anything else
besides Abu Ghraib?

Yet I can vouch
that there was a brief time
when the vision
of the founding fathers appeared
true and within reach.

As an undergraduate,
in England,
in the sixties,
we dreamt dreams,
to go to the moon
with JFK,
to march for freedom
with MLK Jr,
to fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee
with Ali.
Jew, Christian and Muslim,
black and white.
Americans spoke to us,
and for us.
Americans were what we aspired to be;
they were the future.

On September 11, 2001,
I was teaching
my first class
in Washington DC
when a plane flew into the Pentagon

just a few miles away.
I watched in horror,
as we do
at the site of a major catastrophe,
as the great civilization
I knew and loved
slowly but surely turned direction.

I saw how
the highest and mightiest
in the land
abandoned ideas of
civil liberty and
human rights
while they advocated
the illegal and the unimaginable:
the President supported torture
by his men,
the Vice-President
was keen
on 'water-boarding', a medieval favorite.
I knew instinctively
how far the vision of
Washington and Jefferson,
had been abandoned.

Young boys and girls
barely out of high school,
driven by righteous anger
and nationalist zeal,
were sent abroad to kill
and destroy.
They—like the rest of us—became
the victims of a world-view
based in arrogance, anger and ignorance
(one would be bad enough,

the three together
were a guarantee
of failure).

I saw the silence
of the academics and intellectuals,
the betrayal by the politicians
and the media,
once the freest and noisiest in the world,
now vying to be embedded
with the soldiers
in Iraq and Afghanistan;
dreams of empire
slowly sinking in the quicksand
of a prolonged, senseless
violent and costly
war that has no end
and no objective
and no hope
of success.

I saw a darkness
settle on the land.

The voices of dissent
that began to grow
started too late
and were easily contained;
so the momentum
towards decline continued.

History will record
the empire was halted
by the impoverished
but proud
peoples of two
Muslim nations.

Now, three trillion dollars
and a million lives later,
there was little stomach
to contemplate
future military adventures
and America's sheer exhaustion
combined with its failure to see
its predicament.
All the while,
the Russian bear
and Chinese dragon
watched in glee
—and waited.

When the returned soldiers
exposed the horrors
that they were encouraged
to participate in
it still made little impact
on a society
confused
and numb
with uncertainty, fear, and paranoia.

These men
became heroic
as they challenged
the official story
and recounted
how they were asked
to shoot civilians at random,
to increase body count
which would add to their credit.

And women spoke of
the rape they risked

from their own soldiers
when they went to answer the call of nature.

Yet the politicians spoke of bringing
democracy and civilization
to the world;
this was not only a sick joke
to the occupied peoples
but to those who still yearned for what
an ideal America promised.

The anger and ignorance
around Islam remained dangerously high.
An outstanding presidential candidate,
bursting with charisma,
loudly and repeatedly
was attacked simply
because his middle name was Hussein.

And I wrote and spoke
of all these dangers
to little avail.

The wheel of fortune
had turned
onto a path
which would eventually lead
to the crowded graveyard of empires.

I knew
I was witness
to the moment
when another empire
entered its cycle of decline.
And I prayed that with it
the great and the good ideas
it once stood for—

human rights, civil liberties
and democracy—
would not be buried
in the debris.

The Song of China

presupposes
and predicts the Empresses labial offering
when the wheel turns and brings
to my window
a scented hovering of summerspace bees;
Spring arrives with musk and
jasmine in her dyed hair
while far away and a long ago
an omniloving slave sits waiting
in ancient Cathay's nomad tent.
Let her sit awhile
for when she stirs
her revered masters will know
the pull of the centrifugal force;
a thousand lotuses sway
a thousand maidenheads fall
stir—far away Cathay
stirs

come

the Sons of Heaven mount the
oncemounted stirrups of their subjected disciplines
and ride again with us in the
newly-lighted night.
Hooves that drum-beat on the scalp of Time
must waver to pause to post-tell
of the direction
where are ancient horses sent to?
and is there none to mourn them?

imperial parallels

horded into the golden india
of your alluvial plains
knowing no rest neither fear
blood that neglects in drains

blood there must be:
lives that will eosin-end
you will yet belong to me
kali, to me you will bend

your delhi and somnath
will fall, will fall
benares in a bloody bath
hark to the ancient call

the call of the kettle-drum
that beats a path to the ganges
to your ganges i come
borne on the bukhara breeze

rubber fires that crackle about
shrieks that carry high
empires and armies in rout
in an inflated awful cry

premonition of another zahir-ud-din
premonition of the heaped mounds
the skulls that clearly mean
death makes its regular rounds

when conquered to rest
a moment in your india above
aplunge in your twilight breast
that tambourine beats a new love

yet in triumph there is doubt
for every babar come to deflower
there is a ghazni his indian bout
and was he the first in the bower?

you will pardon a new dynasty
you will pardon a new rule
your kafir past demands much of me
and the hero may yet prove a fool

in you doomed to create
a mausoleum in marbled white
that will take mumtaz's weight
naked as the sun: lost loves light

in conquest I decreed to make
in you a shalimar, green-cooled
of bird, garden and love-lake
building as if never before ruled

there will never be a buxar
never permit another clive
never lose another war
ever stay in you, ever alive.

twilight days and delhi nights

leave us here in our women's chambers
leave us here so secure
chewing the lotus
with lotus maidens
amidst the fumes of a suspended past
that waft away
an uncertain future

space so marble-cooled
illusions so fixed behind crenellated
tiled and cypress walls

the blood and passion of war
the heat and dust
of the summer plains
is far
far is panipat
farther the streams of samarkand

sweet the tintinnabulation
of the tiny golden bells
on female feet
sweet the swirl of the skirt

leave us in the zenana
to frolic as imperial transvestites
to shrieks of cool laughter

and the soft pleasures
of the indian clime

don't start
oh son of taimur

that strange sound is just
the british bugle playing its tune
take another pull

with golden goblets and jeweled swords
let us play out the history of our race
let us once again war
and love
here
behind the laced curtains of the women's chambers

Spring thoughts in Farghana

The alfresco burial is done.

The pipe and the kettle-drum
have sung the warrior to his sleep;
the mourners wail their way
back to the village.

High above,
the mountains which stretch
like a young man's ambition in springtime,
an iced drizzle starts to speak
of a last snowfall to come.
Soon the passes will be clear.

The boy, not yet twelve,
gathers his father's breastplate
sword and standard;
his only legacy
to work his fabled visions
of empire and adventure.

A bitter wind squeezes his face tight
concurs a mood
but in his clear eyes
are dreams of faraway kingdoms in Kabul.

you, my father

I saw in those forgotten files
a photograph
a fading daguerreotype
of you, my father

now so gentle
white and near

you, my father
half-seen in the yellowing solar topee
knee-long shorts and the Imperial stance
the faithful servant of the Raj
that strode a world
so secure and warm
under the never-sinking pink sun;
misted autumnal khaki world:
cricket flannels, Simla summers
polo and pith helmets
sherbet and shikar
Indian heat and gymkhana retreat;

Olympian security
felt
not always shared

and the distant tread of gandhian
feet naked in the night.

Yours a simple wardrobe:
the other native mask
inturned, cloth-spun, clay-made
that looked over your shoulder
to a favourite Mughal

to some Ghalib,
Aligarh
and even Iqbal.

Inside: lapped about
in the sure susurrant waves
in the ocean of shared Muslim cultures,
ruffled by the deeds of dead Muslim heroes.
Outside: basked in the warmth
of an Empire at high noon.

You stood to attention when your father
entered
(or an Englishman)
you walked your morning constitutionals
(or played tennis if the sahib so wished)
you fought to pull up babu standards
(and to strive up to the bara sahib's).

But that misted subliminal stance
on the two stocky legs
of security and confidence

I lack.

In my repertoire:
the Mao book, the American scheme
the English tweed, the Indian dream
the Mughal drug, the Muslim scream

and I rest bewildered
weary-legged and stooped in youth

the forest is thick
the night black

and the sky-lights too many
and the sky-lights too bright.

I put back the gray daguerreotype
with
a little atavistic nostalgia
a little admiration

and some envy.

PENSÉES

the rent

I heard the tear of silk
and when I turned
I saw
him
slip;
a hand just above sinking water
like a finger-stretched lotus
making small noises
in the wilderness;
death tip-toes by
a finger on its lips
as if playing games
to come later
in an iced
Himalayan dream.

nauroz

other joys will come
other springs to follow

other mouths will sing their songs
other eyes form their tears

look for me with my friends
look again and look in vain

look for my shape and form
look again and look in vain

slowly spring will tip-toe in
to fail to find me

perhaps

fail to place my new form
to pass on as a forgotten friend
to other people
and other songs

sufic slants

and the thought
where will I be in autumn
and will any of these
ever recall
that single moment
of total identity
or will any of these
mourn;
of places: half-seen
of people: half-known
of memories: half-faded

but
sometimes
it is sad
then there is a melting
that dissolves, expands
me to the hushed air
the sinking sun
the pale moon, the tree
the rock, the grass, the leaf
the bird in flight;

there is a fish I hear
that battles against the stream
and wins

Circe's call

Whenever they captured
the far-sweated-cry
of the oarsman's oar
stirred a memory
that waited torpid
beneath
the far-sweated-cry
voiced on a foreign tongue
which none heed
none hear
and none warn
called in a recognized throat
arousing
subitaneous lust
that walks the land of fever
resting only to pounce
and catch us
with our grizzled trousers down

Oh people of twin-citied
twin-evilled
Isolatery and Pridery
beware
the fever walks again
somewhere in the esurient dark
on padded feet
soft as
the Man-Eaters of Kumaon.

Gather your wax
and save your designs
the batik-wallah makes his
rounds

and blood is his dye
and death his print;
meanwhile their rind glints gold
in safety and total ignorance.

high on these slopes

on the himalayas of solitude
within seeing distance of
a pleasure dome
a golden pleasure dome
of rare device
caves of emerald
walls of ice
half-hidden
in moving mists
of yellows and reds

time walks heavily
on elephant's feet
blotting out
the ants and insects of past days

the profundity of life
with its sad and ancient patterns
repeating themselves with piston precision
pushing out their senseless energy
in jet thrusts
all seem irrelevant
beyond the ear
high on these slopes

under the illusions of conviviality
there is only white and cold bone
and
every man must stand alone.

Votive Peregrination

the clap of thunder
and jagged silence
hails
the sun-flaked swarm
riding high
in a momentary calm
of synthetic awe.
To witness emotions
drilled in Time
and fossilized
like the
luminous eyes of the
loved ones
now gone gently
into the atrophied hunger
of the blackening universe.
All is stilled save
for the ejaculations
of a wounded victim
to the sheets
of age and lust.

but Minerva flaps
in startled
sheen of exit.
Ganesh crows
and all the wakings
of the lidless Buddha
cry 'enough' for
Mullah Nasruddin
still deceiving the clowns.

While the hirsute harlot
haggles in a spate

of syncopated areca
and the coleopteral
bureaucrat hums
of the inanities of
movement I bear
witness to the charivari
of man's folly in
sinking grace and
silent head.

I asked
'what is in life?'
the hag cackled, the
bureaucrat continued
with his humming
with bated breath
wheezing now.
Minerva froze in flight.
The toothless sycophants
chanted in glabrous halitosis
in the unison born of
discalced despair
'Fihi Ma Fihi'.

The kingdom of Heaven

Alone in my condition
neither friends nor Fridays
the city of shades
exists in me
and gazing through metal
shafts
of view I rest confused
wherever I peer I see
a giant eye-ball
scrutinizing me.

I drop my eyes like
'Pindi maidens to run
up against concrete and clay
that bakes me in.
Can spiders endure
their own webbing?
as the chill of uncertainty,
a church-bell tongue,
touches
me on a parched
oesophagus.

I exist.

Only in my city:
the poltroonery of
an ecaudated monarch.

Haiku effects

Alone on my way—
friendless and foreign
in the sunset of my day.

Solitude of the fight
stretched over years
and always—fading light.

A fever parted—and all
the dawns break
in the autumn of my fall.

Age.....?

the lips that set a smile
yet forehead frown
there comes
that stage
when a man
stands still—
then dies.
Hungstill in flight
snow-drifted white
and
soft he pauses
to sink or
allmotion
into that mosquito-bite
of hell
ever-thrashing
from his lizard perch
on the inverted roof.
He must then—
decide.

"Time must have a stop"

Marmoreal dreams
poured into a
conch
and left
to atrophy
of a childhood faded
and a manhood dissipated
in opiates
of the sinking eye
and caste will die
or take me bubbling to the bottom
of the cup of sensibility
drained by Time—
and left aside.

Under the looking-glass

each man
knows
he screams
the special
victim
when autumn turns its back
on him
and in disappointments
is inclined to insist
why me;
though he exists like the
royal white elephant
in the corner-hearts
of the billowing Siamese believers:
tread softly in the slaked graveyard
of the elephant;
those who dig graves at night
are greedy for love
and every man is a growing hero
from an angle
but we know
archetypical me
and me
that under the magnified microscope
squirms
not me
but every man

the long wait

I only feel akin to them
in my thoughts
and no more—
face to face
they appear in frozen miniature
and never-never changing
only I
seem distant;

here
is the cold
gelding
sun-beams
into golden ice-cubes
that drop at my feet
in repetition of themes
the pattern of dreams—
as exciting as an avuncular yawn;

hereunder
where a man
becomes an
economic commodity
to be weighed in the
marriage market
as assiduously as a cows
udder
at the village fair
tell-all streamers
sticking in him
like some scored Spanish toro
or bunting in a small hall
for children at Christmas.

Lying in the deep nostril
I wait by fire-light
crouched and also, happily, nonchalant
for it to happen-in
    the saltless touch of leprosy.

horror burnt

standing tilted
on that crew-cut hillock
I see
those periwinkle patches of anemones
of yesterdays swarthy self
which also chant
repeated Arabic
as if gargling
salt water;
ill-met by half-light
when the moon
wobbled
on its legs
of recent pregnancy
and gave
tangerined-embryo
to another narcissus.

lend me your efforts

and some
they
loved
and some
loved
them
too much
tomorrow
must come another
dawn
and another day?
can they be torn like
the useless
appendix
and when will
the vesuvius
under my scalp
vomit
my threaded days
that
disown me
—in the interregnum
everything is still
as still
as
an
Egyptian hieroglyph

my green valleys

I am told
that if this orange is my earth
the nearest star
is 2,000 miles from my birth
this the febrile first
many more without dearth;
judge you now
in serious manikin mirth
my bangled import.

Patched of water and bone
confined by numbing years
came and shut to live alone
tantalized daily by tantivy fears
(even the clown spins his jeers)

then water and good jaw
after forty odd years
stuffed in the earths maw
in nimbly forgotten tears
(unless earlier. Faulty gears?)

all the famous while
the sun the moon the earth
play out their own insignificant worth
in a universe that reaches
if our globe a stunned gram
then it all its rufous beaches.

Invitation

invitation
to a freefalling
down the bowels of the
windfall night
slap onto Chalk Cliff:
her thigh
now I feel
I'm not the man my father was.
Those turned fingers
at my feet
that trace
simian ancestors
and soon my ostrich neck
will
yearn to plunge into the sands
or my blinded baby-blue eyes
continue to see the dancing lights
of a reality folded
as soberly
as an umbrella after the monsoons.
No.
Come, let us leave all this behind
and escape in the chloroforms
of the everyday farce.

# of nightmares

Where are those nightmares
of yesterday
perhaps
shaded
in the tints of tomorrow
we died so many deaths
that concepts of finality
became
an irritant
tunnel-ends are a bore
even in the tubes of terror
and acclimatization
dulls dread
but where
are the nightmares of yesterday
why
buried
in the disused slug-heaps of my ego

prospects

Suffering from the Siddharta syndrome
modern urban man confronts his prospects:
secure with wife, child, house and car.

Serenity is what we strive for;
survival
what we settle on

suspended somewhere
between the two
with a confusing backdrop
of various cultural influences
we
invariably, ultimately
settle for
survival:
perhaps
because it is physically comfortable
perhaps
because serenity
doesn't come so easily nowadays
perhaps
serenity as a panacea
(as the Gautama would be the first to admit)
is rejected doctrine today:
however, the eye is not blinded
when the eyelid falls;

in any case,
when crawling through the
great doughnut of existence,
those who do find it
do not suffer the Siddharta syndrome.

A beginning

he looks so small
even funny
peeping under umbrella shades
stepping over bodies
leaving a trail of tears
on the sand.
The child trips behind.

The sun beats
the stretching sea into a
Boeing's-eye view of blue.

From her perch
she wallows in godlike power
her life hangs in the balance
like the eagle motionless
before her
and suddenly to spite his love
turns to her companion's advances.

Far below
while her child begins to cry
he is apologizing
sweating
and trying to explain.

cancer

I ask why
why has the poetry in me
dried up?
perhaps
my blood is turning to water
a bureaucrat's job is not easy
it coarsens the soul
blunts the mind
kills the heart
(Sartre: his hands
are filthy in shit and blood
up to his elbows)
and here
dirt, ignorance, disease
and also poverty
(the famed syndrome of despair)
surround me like the
quicksands of a forecast doom—
the slow death
of cancer.

Au Bord du Lac Léman

tireless, desiring, persistent
opaque water scrambles to the lips of the shore.
Deep in thought, glides the sedate swan
while virgin-white gulls wing
round in an ecstasy of freedom.
And like ghostly specters the jagged peaks
glow with the blood the dying sun has
splattered while staggering to its daily gory
death.
A quiet holiness enthralls me
and my being drifts involuntarily to THEE.

In Memoriam

Bubbling brimming
beautitude
that
froths my life
along, and bounty
of sane
love
that creates
my life along
is silent
anon crackles
voices of friends
crept slowly into the past
leaving me
awonder
in solitude
navel-like;
Oh bubble again
spirits from the past,
cry again to the
din of laughter
or drag those
haunted
whispered
fading memories
from my perplexed
mind
now beaten into
the corner of resignation.

L'Aigle

Under the warm sun, 'neath the cold sky,
Watching lazy flakes go drifting by,
And through the clouds and out again,
Float, motionless, moving, outstretched
wings.....
All our endeavours and achievements are in
vain,
All tears, laughter, feats and failures and
things,
For ever in a swirling chaos we breathe,
Till crowned with death's own wreath;
But high above human pains and fears,
The eagle through half-shut eyes peers,
Scornfully sees the confusion and cant,
Glides away, without pity, without a pant.

What is it that I seek?

A force of such might
it sets me free
A light so bright
it blinds me

I heard it in the voice of the nightingale
I know it was in the hearts of the wise
I sensed it in the lover's tale
I saw it in your eyes

I heard it in Rumi's poetry
I know it was in Gandhi's gaze
I sensed it in Mandela's oratory
I saw it in Jesus' ways

What is this riddle and what is its part?
What is this enigma and mystery?
What can reveal the secrets of the heart?
What has the power to change me?

It is God's greatest gift
It raises us high above
It is the bridge over the rift
It is love, love, love

Give it in generous measure
Give it as if there's no tomorrow
Give to all you meet this treasure
Give it and banish sorrow

AUTHOR'S GLOSSARY

Abu Ghraib – Iraqi prison notorious for accounts of torture, sexual humiliation, rape, and homicide after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Afridi – Pukhtun tribe inhabiting a rough hilly area west of the Peshawar Valley and extending down into the Khaibar Pass.

Agra – city on the banks of the river Yamuna in northern India renowned for the Taj Mahal.

Alamgir – literally the 'world conqueror' and the title of Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal emperor who ruled from 1658 until his death in 1707.

'alif lam mim' – these three letters appear before some of the chapters of the Quran and have puzzled and teased commentators from the time it was revealed. They are said to contain divine and mystic secrets which will only be unlocked on Judgment Day.

Alhambra – literally 'the red fortress' situated in Granada; it is one of the most spectacular palaces from the time Muslims ruled Spain.

Aligarh – city in India; home to the Aligarh Muslim University.

Allah – name for God.

Andalucia – from al-Andalus, the region in Spain once ruled by Muslims from the 8th into the 15th century and renowned for the art, architecture and scholarship that flourished as Jews, Christians and Muslims lived and worked together.

asr – afternoon daily prayer recited by practicing Muslims.

Averroes – or Ibn Rushd, widely influential 12th-century Andalusian Muslim scholar and philosopher, admired by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Avicenna – or Ibn Sina, Persian scholar who lived in the 10th and 11th centuries and was considered the foremost physician and philosopher of his time.

ayatollah – high-ranking title given to Shia clerics after producing a body of scholarship.

azaan – the call to prayer.

Babar – literally 'tiger'; the common name for Zahir-ud-din Babar, the Muslim conqueror from Central Asia who laid the foundations for the Mughal dynasty early in the 16th century.

Badr – town between Mecca and Medina, and site of the first great battle of Islam in 624 AD in which Muslims gained a crucial victory. Badr remains a popular metaphor for contemporary Muslims.

Badshahi – the grand 'King's Mosque' in Lahore completed in 1673 by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

bara sahib – literally 'big sahib', which meant 'the British' during British rule in India.

Barakzai – Pukhtun tribe in Afghanistan.

batasha – white drops of candied sugar sold at shrines as part of the offering.

batik-wallah – someone who deals in traditional Javanese batik.

Bedouin – tribal ethnic group living in North Africa and parts of the Middle East.

Benares – Indian holy city situated on the banks of the river Ganges.

Bengali – ethnic community native to the historic region of Bengal in South Asia.

Berber – indigenous peoples of North Africa west of the Nile Valley.

Bihari – ethnic group originating from the state of Bihar in India.

bismillah – used as a shorthand for the widely quoted Islamic phrase "bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim" ('In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful').

Brahmin – member of the dominant priestly class among Hindus and considered the repository of sacred learning.

Bukhara – the capital of the Bukhara province of Uzbekistan and once known for its colleges and scholars.

burkha – enveloping outer garment worn by some Muslim women to cover their bodies in public.

Burton – refers to Sir Richard Francis Burton who translated the Arabic *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (*The Arabian Nights*) and other books from the 'Orient' into English.

Buxar – city in the eastern part of India where British victory over Muslim forces in a crucial battle in 1764 opened the way to Delhi and eventual British control of India.

Cathay – an alternative name for historical China.

chota-pegs – literally 'small drink of spirits', popularized from the time of the British in India.

Cordoba – capital city of al-Andalus and once the glittering center of learning and art.

Dacca – (also Dhaka) capital of Bangladesh.

Dahta – short for Dahta Ganj Baksh; the popular name for Ali Hujwiri, one of the most famous Sufi saints of the subcontinent who lived in the 11th century and whose shrine in Lahore attracts large numbers of both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Deccan – the 'Great Peninsular Plateau' which makes up most of southern India.

Elphinstone – one of the main streets in Karachi named after a renowned British administrator.

Farghana – place in present day Uzbekistan and birthplace of Babar.

feringhee – Hindi/Urdu word for European.

'Fihi Ma Fihi' – a Muslim mystic concept meaning 'it is what it is' and the title of Mawlana Rumi's book of prose, written early in the 14th century and considered the first ever Persian book of prose.

Fulani – ethnic group of people found predominantly in West Africa.

Ganesh – with his elephant head, is one of the most beloved and venerated Hindu deities.

Ganges – largest river in India and of religious significance for Hinduism.

Gautama – name of the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha.

Ghalib – Mirza Ghalib who lived in the Indian subcontinent during British colonial rule is considered one of the greatest of Urdu and Persian poets.

Ghazni – city in central Afghanistan and associated in the subcontinent with the conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni known for his numerous raids into India. Mahmud is reviled in India as a ruthless plunderer and admired in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a victorious champion of Islam.

ghee – clarified butter used in South Asian cooking and rituals.

Ghor – province in central Afghanistan.

Golgotha – hill on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

Gurkha – refers to people of northern India and Nepal famous for their military prowess in the service of the British army.

gymkhana – a club, which originated in British India.

Haroon's Nights – refers to the greatest of the Abbasid rulers, Harun ar-Rashid whose fabulous reign inspired the tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, which provided fictional characters like Aladdin and Sinbad.

Hashtnagar – part of Charsadda District in northern Pakistan known for its rich agricultural lands.

hujra – Pukhtun cultural gathering for community discussion.

Hujwiri – see Dahta Ganj Baksh.

Hyderabad – was once a mighty Muslim kingdom and center of culture and learning. It is now the capital of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and known as the City of Pearls.

ICS – Indian Civil Service; an elite cadre of civil servants who administered British India.

Imam – Islamic religious leader and title given to a Muslim who leads the congregational prayer in a mosque.

Iqbal – Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the national poet of Pakistan, and one of the greatest Muslim poets of the 20th century; known for his advocacy of the revival of a humanist Islam and the creation of a modern Muslim state in India.

jomay raat – Thursday night, considered a particularly religious time of the week.

jubbah – a long loose outer garment with wide sleeves, worn by Muslim men and women.

kafir – unbeliever, used in a religious context.

kahjal – eye cosmetic used to darken the eyelids and eyelashes since ancient times.

kala-sahib – literally 'black sahib'; pejoratively used for native Indians who imitated the 'sahib', a term once commonly used for British officials.

Kali –from Kala or 'black', the female Hindu divinity of death, known for her images wearing a garland of skulls with blood dripping down her mouth and holding severed heads in her hands.

Karachi – largest city in Pakistan.

Khaibar Pass – mountain pass linking Pakistan and Afghanistan and historically the main pass into the subcontinent.

Khaldun – refers to Ibn Khaldun, famous scholar, philosopher, and historian; he is considered father of the social sciences.

khan – a title for a landlord, chief, or ruler.

Khattak – Pukhtun tribe located in the settled areas of northern Pakistan.

Khayyam – Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) was a Persian polymath, mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, physician, and poet; Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* into English in the Victorian era earned the poet an international readership.

kissan – someone who works in the field or factory; contrasting with the khan or landlord.

Kubla – refers to the poem *Kubla Khan* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

L'Aigle – (French) the eagle.

Lahori – relating to the city of Lahore.

lal – literally 'red'; orthodox Muslim men use henna to dye their beards and hair red, especially when they become white.

Lal Killa – the Red Fort of Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan, located within the walls of Old Delhi

maghrib – the fourth of five formal daily prayers performed by Muslims, just after sunset.

Malinowski – refers to Bronisław Kasper Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist and one of the major figures in the discipline.

Mandi – literally 'bazaar', but in this case a euphemism for the prostitutes' quarter in Lahore.

Man-Eaters of Kumaon – a book written by Jim Corbett detailing the experiences Corbett had in the Kumaon region of India in the 1920s and 1930s, while hunting man-eating tigers and leopards.

Maulvi – title given to religious scholars.

Mawdoodi – Mawlana Mawdoodi, Islamic scholar and theologian, who founded the influential Jamaat-i-Islami, a religious party which is widely known in the Muslim world and especially prominent in South Asia.

Mecca – city in Saudi Arabia, which contains the holiest site in Islam.

Medina – city in Saudi Arabia with the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad and therefore considered the second-holiest city in Islam.

Mohmand – a tribe among the Pukhtun peoples situated in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

muezzin – man who proclaims the call to prayer in the mosque.

Mughal – imperial dynasty of India which lasted from 1526 to 1857.

Muhajirs – refers to those mainly Urdu speaking refugees who fled India to the new state of Pakistan in 1947 and afterwards.

Muhammad Mustapha – name of the Holy Prophet of Islam.

Mullah Nasruddin – legendary Muslim sage known for his irony and wit, especially when dealing with the foibles of the rich and powerful.

Multani – associated with Multan, a major city in south Pakistan.

muminun – plural for 'the believers'.

Mumtaz – Mumtaz Mahal, Mughal empress, in whose honor the emperor Shah Jehan built the Taj Mahal.

'n'ai rien compris' – (French) 'I haven't understood anything'.

"Na koi banda raha na koi banda nawaz" – a well-known line from Iqbal's poem which means that in the Muslim formation at prayer there is no master or slave as they are all equal before God.

nagri – literally 'town' or 'city'; in this case meaning Lahore, or the city of the Dahta.

nauroz – literally 'new day'; traditional celebration of the ancient Iranian New Year.

Nowshera – city in Pakistan divided by the Kabul river.

Panipat – ancient city in north India; three battles fought near the city decided the fate of who would rule India.

Partition – the division of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India in 1947.

piffer – from Punjab Irregular Force, a regiment formed by the British in the 19th century and now applied to members of the Pakistan Army's Frontier Force Regiment.

'Pindi – local word for Rawalpindi, large city near Islamabad.

pir – a religious mentor, usually in the Sufi tradition.

Pukhtun – ethnic group largely concentrated in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan; second-largest ethnic group in Pakistan.

Pukhtunwali – (or Pushtunwali in Afghanistan) non-written ethical code and lifestyle followed by Pukhtuns which rests in notions of hospitality, revenge and honor.

Punjab – a region, rich in culture and history, straddling the modern border between India and Pakistan and once considered the bread basket of Asia.

Quran – Muslim holy book.

RADA – Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

Raj – From British Raj – or rule. The name given to the period of British colonial rule in greater South Asia between 1857 and the Partition of India in 1947.

Ram – Lord Ram is one of the main figures in Hindu sacred literature and is popular in India among Hindus and Muslims alike for his noble and heroic virtues.

Ramzan – (also Ramadan) Islamic month of fasting.

Rumi – Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic, is widely read and loved in the Muslim world and is also well known in the United States today.

sahib – term of respect used for people in authority or elders but once associated with the British in India.

salaam – the word for peace in Arabic and commonly used as a greeting.

Samarkand – ancient city in present day Uzbekistan; once a center for Islamic architecture, scholarship, and civilization.

Sanskrit – historic Indo-Aryan language used in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Santahar Junction – Railway Station in Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan.

seraglio – sequestered living quarters for women and part of the traditional Turkish harem.

shajra – short for shajra-e-nasab; literally 'tree of ancestry' or genealogical charter.

Shalimar – celebrated Mughal gardens located in Lahore.

shalwar – loose pajama-like trousers widely worn by men and women in South Asia.

shikar – hunting.

Shinto – indigenous spirituality of Japan.

Shinwari – Pukhtun tribe of western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan.

Sialkot – city and district in northeast Pakistani Punjab.

Siddharta – birth name of the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha.

Simla – the summer capital of British India.

Sindh – one of the four provinces of Pakistan.

Somnath – Hindu temple located on the western coast of Gujarat, India, and a target of plunder for Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century.

Sufi – practitioner of mystical Islam; the word sufi is said to derive from 'suf' or the simple woolen garment worn by the Prophet Muhammad.

sultan – title of ruler.

Sunni – the largest branch of Islam, comprising up to 90 percent of the total Muslim population.

Swat – valley/district in northern Pakistan known for its natural beauty.

Tahtarra – mountain at the Khaibar Pass.

Taimur – known as Tamerlane in English, who in the 14th century founded the Timurid Empire in Central Asia and was considered a direct ancestor of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty.

Taj Mahal – mausoleum located in Agra, India; one of the most recognizable structures in the world; built by Mughal emperor Shah Jehan in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

tangah – a light horse-drawn carriage.

tarboor – the father's brother's son; traditionally the subject of agnatic rivalry or enmity in Pukhtun society.

topee – British Indian name for pith helmet; a lightweight cloth-covered helmet made of cork or pith.

Umar – the second Muslim ruler—or Caliph—after the Prophet Muhammad's death; he is widely revered among Muslims as a figure of great valor, piety and austerity; his reign from 634 to 644 AD was marked by rapid Islamic expansion.

Xerxes – king of ancient Persia who is known in history for his invasion of Greece in the 5th century BC.

Zahir-ud-din – name of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty in the Indian subcontinent early in the 16th century.

zenana – the part of a house reserved for the women of the household.

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ABOUT AKBAR AHMED

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Poetry

Akbar Ahmed's *Suspended Somewhere Between* is a collection of poetry from the man the BBC calls "the world's leading authority on contemporary Islam." A mosaic of Ahmed's life, which has traversed cultural and religious barriers, this book of verse is personal, with a vocal range from introspective and reflective to historical and political. The poems take the reader from the forbidding valleys and mountains of Waziristan in the tribal areas of Pakistan to the think tanks and halls of power in Washington, D.C.

Akbar Ahmed is the author of over a dozen award-winning books, including *Discovering Islam* and *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*.

"Akbar Ahmed is a national treasure. Allow him to lead you through his tumultuous, thrilling life in this gorgeous collection of poems, written across five decades and three continents – a life of loss, despair, child-like wonder, and love."

– Dan Futterman, actor (*A Mighty Heart*, as Daniel Pearl, 2007) and Oscar-nominated screenwriter (*Capote*, 2005)